BECOMING ONE WITH CHRIST

Pastoral Priorities of the Diocese of Evansville

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the account of the calling of the first disciples in the Gospel of John (1:35-42), we read that John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to meet Jesus. During this encounter, Jesus invites them to come, see and know Him. The day they spent with the Lord so impacted them that we are told that they immediately went forth and shared the truth that Jesus is the Christ. One of them, Andrew, told his brother Simon and brought him to meet the Lord. Simon, in turn began his new life as a disciple, receiving the name Peter. Andrew and Peter would one day both be chosen to be apostles, literally those *sent forth* to proclaim the Gospel.

At the acceptance of Jesus' invitation, "Come, follow me," the pattern of encounter, entering into relationship, and being sent was repeated for each of the disciples. From the moment of that invitation, they were challenged to search the depths of their hearts and commit themselves to the great mystery and adventure of following Him and *becoming one with Christ*. At His Ascension, the Lord gave them, and all who would follow them, the mission to share the faith and to make disciples, and then on Pentecost, He bestowed the Holy Spirit to empower us for this mission. For the past 2,000 years, the Catholic faith has been passed on to countless billions in all corners of the world, because men and women of every time and place have responded to Christ's invitation to follow, learn and then share the Good News. The need for such a missionary impetus is certainly great in our own day.

Therefore, in the fall of 2023, I formed a group of faithful men and women, clergy, religious and laity from around the Diocese, to help establish pastoral priorities for our life and ministry. Over the following year, we met several times for an extended period of prayer, study and discussion, seeking to discern the direction of the Holy Spirit in our local Church. We carefully considered conversations that had been held with clergy, religious, the lay faithful and even those not of the Catholic faith. The fruit of this intensive process was the proposal that our pastoral priority needs to be missionary discipleship, as well as a recommendation on the method we would employ to make it a reality. Our various diocesan advisory groups reviewed and affirmed this missionary imperative of our Diocese, namely: To encounter Christ in a profound way, deepen our relationship with Him and our Catholic faith, and engage intentionally as witnesses and missionary disciples in our community.

Over the next five years, as we work to implement this pastoral priority on every level — diocesan, parish, school and individual — I invite us all to accept this challenge in a spirit of hope and joy. The Lord Jesus is still calling us by name to a deeper encounter with Him, especially through Word and Sacrament. He is still inviting us to spend time with him to grow in love and understanding, so that we might deepen our commitment to Him and His Church. He is also inviting us to share in the saving mission of the Church by going out in search of others who are hungering and thirsting for the presence of God in their lives, and to share the fruits of our encounter and relationship with Christ. There is a continual need for us to meet the Lord again and to be faithful to the impact of that encounter with Him.

Regrettably, while the faith is lived beautifully by many of our people, the fundamental values and cultural markers of Catholicism are no longer predominant in our Diocese. Therefore, we are challenged to be more intentional about our faith: to choose to follow the Lord through the life of the Church. In this sense, the Church is always on mission. Pope Paul VI announced, "Thus it is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual member is important for the whole" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15). It is my desire, as the Bishop of the Diocese of Evansville, to stir in us a renewed desire that every person in our 12 counties will hear the Gospel proclaimed anew. It will involve a work of overcoming preconceptions, of healing wounds and of witnessing to the joy of faith in Jesus Christ.

Over the next two years, we will align our diocesan ministries to these pastoral priorities, ensuring that we are united in our efforts to help people encounter, deepen and engage in their relationship with Christ. We will then be better equipped to support our parishes, which serve as missionary centers where our people are called to follow the Lord in radical discipleship. It is not a matter of our parishes doing more "things," but focusing their ministries around the work of growing and nurturing disciples. In the end, however, these cannot simply be the priorities of our offices and parishes. They must become the priorities of every Catholic if we are to be effective in changing hearts and generating new disciples in Christ.

In the coming weeks, look for more information on this effort in your parish bulletins, in "The Message" and on the diocesan website and social media. Posters have been provided to parishes which describe the Pastoral Priorities. A QR code is included with this letter that will be linked to updates.

Please join me in praying for the success of this initiative so that all in our Diocese may open their hearts to receive the Good News of the Gospel, thus *Becoming One with Christ*. May our patroness, Mary the Mother of God, intercede for us and bless our efforts.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Joseph M. Siegel, DD, STL
Bishop of Evansville